Cloue Icefield Exploration and Ascents

Chile, Southern Patagonia, Tierra Del Fuego

In March and April, as part of the multi-objective expedition "Incognita Patagonia," Ibai Rico (Spain) and I (USA, based in U.K.) spent several weeks in southernmost Tierra del Fuego. We based out of the sailboat Northanger. Among the expedition's goals were the first crossing of the Cloue Icefield (227 square kilometers), ascents of its unclimbed peaks, and a survey of the glaciers and their historical and contemporary behavior. Eñaut Izagirre accompanied us for the scientific objectives of our trip.

Cloue is located on a peninsula of Isla Hoste at 52.2°S, south of the Darwin Range, and is probably the area most exposed to Antarctic winds in all of Patagonia. Few have ventured into this region, with reports only from a Canadian-American team in 1989 (AAJ 1992) and a local Argentinean team in 2001. This second trip was completed by Luis Turi and Carolina Etchegoyen. The pair, along with two sailboat crew members, Huges Dligniers and Maripol Guillaumet, briefly visited Cloue to explore access routes after a disappointing time in the Darwin Range because of bad weather. They intended to attempt one of the two peaks we climbed but were repelled from their on-glacier camp by very poor weather.

Cloue was also a favorite for the late, great Charlie Porter, who spent considerable time in the region establishing a network of weather stations (the maintenance of which was another expedition goal), but Charlie's exploits here were undocumented. Prior to our visit, many of the area's fjords were yet to be navigated and major peaks identifiable in satellite imagery were not even visible from sea—true terra incognita in the modern age.

Our team assembled in Puerto Williams on March 3. After paperwork and sailing challenges, we arrived at Coloane Fjord on March 14. Ibai and I had carefully planned a 30km route from here, crossing the peninsula and icefield from west to east (to assess the peaks and glaciers for later ascents and further study, respectively).

After a day scouting the lower glacier and access to the upper icefield, we left Northanger on March 16with a promising weather forecast for several days. Carrying equipment and fuel for a week, we hoped to make a fast crossing. We made good progress in warm, calm conditions, rapidly crossing the lower glacier, scrambling to the upper icefield plateau, and approaching the first major pass on skis. Here, the weather suddenly deteriorated and zero visibility forced us to camp among rocks exposed at the pass. As fog turned to snow and heavy wind, we were trapped in a storm that evening and the entire next day, unable to even see the skis on our feet during a short foray out.

Encouraged by a relative improvement in weather conditions—and hastened by a forecast suggesting a sustained, heavy storm after a short opening—we collected camp and left at 2 a.m. on March 18. The forecast was wrong again and we found ourselves in the worst storm that either of us had experienced—and at night. Snow fell heavily and we could barely see our skis or each other, making glacier navigation and roped glacier travel arduous and slow. Sequential chubascos (intense thunderstorms) tortured our calves with machine gun–like hail, and wind gusts of hurricane strength threw us several meters at a time.

In the darkness and guided solely by GPS relative to our own custom maps, we discovered many small crevasses but managed to avoid the worst crevasse zones. We could not find natural shelter

from the storm, and it was too windy to set up a camp and too cold to dig a cave. Instead, we were forced to continue carefully without stopping all night and the following day, when visibility improved slightly. Our traverse route passed near serac zones and over narrow passes, and involved scrambling along rocky ridges, rappelling down near-vertical forests, and finally traveling along a broken glacier tongue. We were on the move for 18 hours between our last camp and Fouque Fjord, where Northanger collected us on March 18.

Unsatisfied with our disastrous experience on the icefield, we decided to return to attempt the principal summits after much-needed recuperation and several days of research. Learning from our prior misery, we adopted a different strategy. Beginning March 23, Ibai and I set up a bombproof camp at sea level in Fouque Fjord, then established and provisioned a very secure advanced camp above a small icefall. We felt comfortable sitting out storms here if necessary. Two peaks looked appealing: Monte Cloue (1,356m), the tallest of the island (but not the Monte Cloven/Pafigliano mentioned by Brad Wrobleski in AAJ 1992 and CAJ 1990, a fact that we established via personal correspondence), soared broadly above the glacier ice, while an unnamed tower jutted up a few kilometers to the south, showing a promising icy gully inside a large dihedral on its east face.

Again the weather changed suddenly, this time warming. On March 26 we ascended the glacier aprons of Monte Cloue from the east, to a backdrop of intermittent squalls of wind and rain. After crossing several large crevasses, we climbed steep glacier ice through the bergschrund and then slowly made our way up several lengths of mixed climbing with rotten snow, hollow ice, and exfoliating rock (300m, IV/M4 70°). The descent was delicate due to loose blocks and limited anchor possibilities.

The warm, wet weather continued the next day. We set off at sunrise with skis to the base of the unnamed tower. To access the ice gully, we passed a bergschrund and mounted a steep avalanche fan leading to a series of vertical rocky steps, intermixed with snow ramps. Here, the warm weather had taken its toll, and the previously icy gulley had largely thawed. Despite icy meltwater flowing along our intended line (literally a waterfall), we managed to climb several pitches of tenuous mixed ground, with crumbling, insecure rock and poor anchor possibilities, to the top of the great dihedral and the summit of this tower (350m, 75° V/M5). We decided to unofficially call this peak Torre Saia (1,320m, 52.2°S, 68.4°E), meaning harpoon or hunting lance in the Yaghan language of the indigenous Yámana tribes, which were exterminated in Tierra del Fuego by Western colonization.

The descent was perhaps more complicated than the ascent, with loose blocks threatening the rope, a stuck rope on one rappel, and deteriorating weather, but we made it to our advanced camp and then to Fouque Fjord and Northanger on March 28.

Before returning to Puerto Williams on April 8, we spent time mapping the glaciers of Cloue Icefield and Fiordo Pia Este of the Darwin Range, with nothing to note of alpine climbing significance; however, research proved promising for understanding the glaciers of the region.

While logistical support and weather forecasting has greatly improved in some regions of Patagonia, enabling fast and light ascents, our experience strongly advocates for slower but more robust approaches in the erratic weather of the remote coastal zones. While documentation is limited for the region, we think that our traverse of Cloue Icefield and the ascents of Monte Cloue and Torre Saia are all firsts.

– Evan Miles, USA

Images

Ibai Rico beginning the climb of Torre Saia’s east face.

Ibai Rico on the last rappel from Torre Saia.

Ibai Rico and Evan Miles, still in a whiteout near the end of the hellish traverse.

View of Torre Saia from the approach to advanced camp, before an intense melting period. The route followed the obvious east-facing dihedral line, alternating between vertical rock steps and snow ramps.

: Evan Miles on the first mixed pitch of Monte Cloue.

Evan Miles climbing loose, blocky ground on Monte Cloue.

Evan Miles climbing on Torre Saia.

Evan Miles moving between vertical rock steps on the east side of Torre Saia.

View of Monte Cloue from the summit of Torre Saia. The ascent route went up the steep glacier and through the rock band before the summit plateau and ridge.

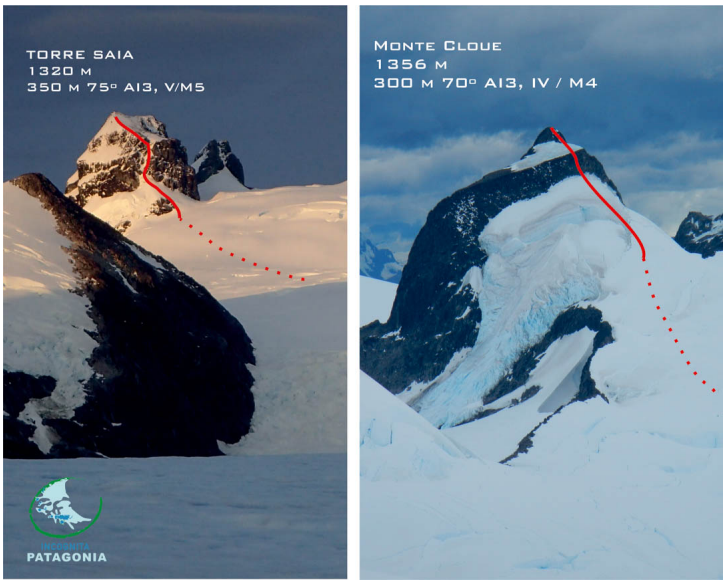
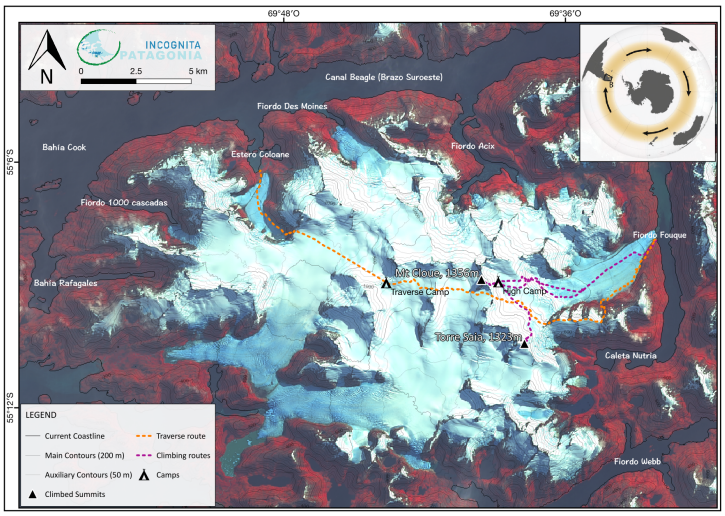


Photo-topo for the first ascents of Torre Saia and Monte Cloue.



Map of the expedition area.

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